

American Record Guide



Rare Verdi
Well Done

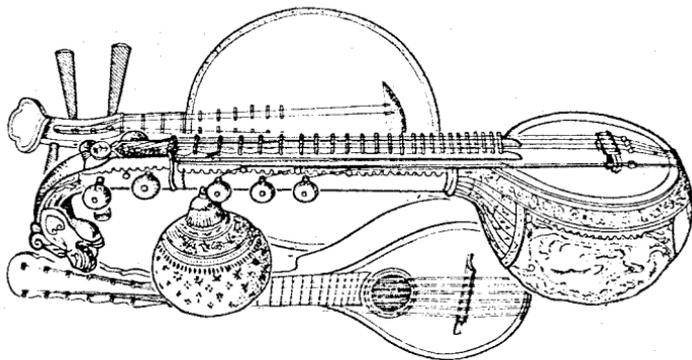


Pollini/Beethoven:
A Magnificent Set

Somary/Vaughan Williams:
Competing 'Passions'

Turandot:
The Big Names Make It

The Russians Are Coming



Collections

LISZT: *Sonata in B minor*; RACHMANINOFF: *Three Etudes-Tableaux* (Op. 33 No. 6 in E flat minor, No. 2 in C, Op. 39 No. 5 in E flat minor); CHOPIN: *Tarantella in A flat*, Op. 43; *Nocturne in F minor*, Op. 55 No. 1; *Scherzo No. 1 in B minor*, Op. 20; Vytautas Smetona, piano. Sirius Records Stereo 1001.

Here is another young pianist with a flair for the romantic piano literature who will bear watching. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, on St. Valentine's Day in 1955, of Lithuanian parentage, Smetona received his early musical education from his mother and brother, both of whom are pianists, and with some *periodic* instruction from Leonard Shure. The selections featured here were recorded "live" during Smetona's 1977 and 1978 Town Hall recitals in New York.

Recordings of the Liszt *B minor Sonata* the record buying public can absorb must be pretty close to saturation by now, yet here is another, worthy of consideration that is also a bit different from the free-wheeling, unorthodox, rhythmic, flexible, highly individual and full of dramatic contrasts of more than average interest. Despite a few smudged passages and some precipitous flying octaves that may not be as clean as some sticklers for clarity might desire, this young pianist had the courage to take chances to achieve what he set out to do, which was to convey what

he calls the Sonata's "Faustian" implications. This he does with mastery and insight and a wide-ranging tonal palette. In the Rachmaninoff and Chopin items, Smetona communicates their poetry and moulds his tone nicely to highlight a dramatic or lyrical point. Especially noteworthy here are the Corymbant thrust and momentum of the Chopin *Tarantella* and his ability to convey and color the contrasting moods of the Scherzo. Smetona has also written his own liner notes which are all that liner notes should be but seldom are.

The piano sound on this smooth-surfaced disc is excellent. A note on the jacket states that this recording was made possible by a grant from the Allan D. Forbes Foundation. A portend of what's coming? Grants for Television—why not for young artists' recordings? Purchasers unable to locate a copy of this LP in the stores might write to: Sirius Records, 28001 Chagrin Blvd., Cleveland, Ohio 44122. —Kammerer

Direct or Digital

STRAVINSKY: *Firebird Suite* (1919). BORODIN: *Prince Igor: Overture, Polovetsian Dances*. Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus conducted by Robert Shaw. Telarc DG 10039, \$14.95.

Stereophonic recordings are expected to reproduce sound with a left and right horizontal placement in front of the listener.

Most stereo records succeed in at least spreading the sound, usually with the treble instruments reproduced to the left and the bass to the right (which will be the subject of further thoughts in a future column). There is another equally important aspect to stereophonic reproduction: the front to back, depth placement of the instruments. The majority of contemporary records use multimiking techniques which spotlight individual instruments, all too often bringing even orchestral soloists to an apparent foreground whatever their actual physical placement. The Abbado Mahler 4th (DG 2530 966) is a recent example of grotesque recording technique that disturbs concentration on the musical content. Loud passages jump to the foreground while soft passages recede to the background in a most disconcerting way. It is to be hoped that the recent emphasis on the sound quality of direct-to-disc and digital recordings will bring with it a greater attention to the true fidelity of the reproduction of instrumental and vocal sounds and their placement in a natural acoustic ambience.

The record at hand is a state-of-the-art example of digital recording for consumer use, and it displays many of the advantages of that system to most spectacular effect. Those seeking an exaggerated close-miked block-buster will be disappointed. The attraction here rests with the naturalness of its sound and the stunning dynamic range. Most immediately striking perhaps is the spatial sense, the feeling of air around the performers and the natural, unforced quality of the orchestral sounds. This is especially apparent in the realistic placement in space of the solo (first chair) violin and cello. By contrast, the *ffff* chords have enormous physical impact. The treble is somewhat thin however, especially the upper strings. A check with an earlier disc, considered in its time to demonstrate outstanding recording quality—*Wagner Overtures*, Detroit Symphony Orchestra conducted by Paul Paray (Mercury SR90232)—reveals a fine full-bodied string reproduction and an overall orchestral sound that rivals the Telarc for naturalness, but cannot compete with the dynamic range nor the stunning brass and timpani. Whether or not the thin treble on

this present disc is caused by the reverberation being frequency dependent is hard to tell. I suspect from a photograph of a previous Telarc recording session that three widely spaced microphones were also used for this record. This microphone set-up is known to produce reverberation times that vary with frequency and also apparent image shift in instrumental placement. This latter I found in a lack of precision in the placements of, especially, the woodwinds on this disc.

Despite the plethora of information on the sleeve, the recording location is not given; also the general acoustic is dry and unresonant. However, nothing can detract from the glory of this record: the unforced beauty of the quiet sounds, well integrated acoustics and the gut-gripping reproduction of the brass.

As to the performances, Robert Shaw brings out the Debussy influences in the *Firebird*, conducting an atmospheric rather than a virtuoso performance—a most attractive interpretation. The *Prince Igor* excerpts are slack and unexciting despite tremendous sonic impact. I take it that the chorus is singing in Russian. It was suggested to me that the chorus is merely humming (the words of the sopranos in the opening dance actually start: "Ultetai na Krylyak Vetra . . ."). The error is easy to make: the chorus is distant and weak, especially the tenor section, lacking bite and vigor. Compare the sound here with the opening of Vaughan Williams' *Symphony No. 1* (Angel SB 3739) which has truly staggering chorus and brass reproduction.

The record seems not to have been pressed on the best quality vinyl. The sleeve notes boast of a 90 db signal to noise ratio, but the surfaces of my copy are noise ridden enough to make a joke of that claim.

I disconnected an amplifier and subwoofer in my system and found the impact of the recording was only a fraction of what it had been. If this record does not make its full impact, you need to upgrade your equipment.

The graphics (uncredited) of the folded sleeve packaging are eye-catching and well laid out. The text of the choruses are given in translation. There are informa-

tive notes by Harold Rogers and Michael Murray but uninformative photographs of a betowelled Robert Shaw and a smiling Dr. Stockham (originator of the digital process used).

(Equipment used: Shure V15 type HI, Rabco SL8E arm, Thorens 125 III turntable, Crown IC150 preamp, Crown and Southwest Technical amplifiers, Dahlquist DQLP I crossover, Magnaplaner 1-U speakers, Hartley 24" subwoofer.) —Payne

Film Music

WILLIAMS: *Superman—The Movie*. London Symphony Orchestra conducted by John Williams. Warner Brothers 2BSK 3257, 2 LPs, \$14.98.

The maturation of John Williams, from the writer of music for films such as *Penelope* and *Guide for the Married Man* to the creator of the noble scores for *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, is one of the most encouraging film musical developments of recent years. Williams has succeeded in reviving the spirit of the symphonic scores of the 1940s without dredging up their clichés. In so doing, he has formulated a distinctively personal musical style, an achievement that cannot be claimed by a goodly number of contemporary composers, both in and out of films. *Superman* is as good an exemplification of Williams' talents as any of his works—both the Richard Straussian sweep

of *Star Wars* and the more mystical eloquence of *CE3K* are here in abundance, in a score that may win its composer yet another Oscar.

This two-disc set is an expertly edited compendium of the many high points, and despite its length it at no point fails to involve the listener. The driving main title music and the heroic theme for the title character are the most immediately impressive elements, but Williams achieves maximum effect in the more subtle music for the boyhood scenes in Kansas. The sequence "Leaving Home" is particularly noteworthy; on screen it gives poignancy to a potentially maudlin moment; on disc it proves to be rich in the simple purity of folk Americana, a musical idiom invoked all too infrequently in both our films and our concert halls.

The recorded sound is not bad but could do with more zip at the high end and more clarity in the bass, and the surfaces provide a constant obbligato of assorted swishes, scratches, and other sounds. Add to this the total lack of annotation, and Warner's packaging can be seen to leave something to be desired. Nonetheless, this will not, and should not, deter those interested in a significant film musical accomplishment from enjoying John Williams' superscore for *Superman*. —Koldys

MANCINI: *Who Is Killing the Great Chefs of Europe?* National Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Henry Mancini. Epic SE 35692, \$8.98.

Mancini's latest cinematic effort starts out promisingly with a lively main title, in his best mock-British mood. But interest quickly flags thereafter, as the scoring for this comedy-mystery resorts to the most tired clichés of the genre (the "funny" bassoon, "romantic" piano solos, etc.). While Mancini's gifts as a melodist are occasionally evident, there is little to sustain any serious involvement in the music until "Final Feast/The Confession," an elegiac sequence remarkably free of the Muzak sound of most of the rest of the score. The National Philharmonic plays well and is cleanly recorded, but \$8.98 seems a bit steep for the 10 minutes or so of music on this disc that is —Koldys

